Communications Strategies

BELLEVUE
UNIVERSITY

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7.4 Public Speaking and Class Presentations

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Public speaking—giving an oral presentation before a class or another group of people—is a special form of interaction common in education. You will likely be asked to give a presentation in one of your classes at some point, and your future career may also involve public speaking. It's important to develop skills for this form of communication.

Public speaking is like participating in class—sharing your thoughts, ideas, and questions with others in the group. In other ways, however, public speaking is very different. You stand in front of the class to speak, rather than from your usual seat—and for most students, that changes the psychology of the situation. You also have time outside of class to prepare your presentation, allowing you to plan it carefully—and, for many, giving more time to worry about it and experience even more anxiety!

Overcoming Anxiety

Although a few people seem to be natural public speakers, most of us feel some stage fright or anxiety about having to speak to a group, at least at first. This is completely normal. We feel like everyone is staring at us and seeing our every flaw, and we're sure we'll forget what we want to say or mess up. Take comfort from knowing that almost everyone else is dreading giving class presentations the same as you are! But you can learn to overcome your anxiety and prepare in a way that not only safely gets you through the experience but also leads to success in your presentation. The following are proven strategies for overcoming anxiety when speaking in public:

- **Understand anxiety.** Since stage fright is normal, don't try to deny that you're feeling anxious. A little anxiety can help motivate you to prepare and do your best. Accept this aspect of the process and work to overcome it. Anxiety is usually worst just before you begin and but eases up once you've begun.

- **Understand that your audience actually wants you to succeed.** They're not looking for faults or hoping you'll fail. Other students and your instructors are on your side, not your enemy. They likely won't even see your anxiety.
- **Reduce anxiety by preparing and practicing.** The next section discusses the preparation process in more detail. The more fully you prepare and the more often you have practice, the more your anxiety will go away.
- **Focus on what you're saying, not how you're saying it.** Keep in mind that you have ideas to share, and this is what your classmates and instructors are interested in. Don't obsess about speaking, but focus on the content of your presentation. Think, for example, of how easily you share your ideas with a friend or family member, as you naturally speak your mind. The same can work with public speaking if you focus on the ideas themselves.
- **Develop self-confidence.** As you prepare, you will make notes you can refer to during the presentation. You're not going to forget what you want to say. The more you practice, the more confident you'll become.

Guidelines for Presentations

Preparing and delivering a presentation in class (or in business or other settings) is a process very similar to the learning process discussed in Chapter 4 "Listening, Taking Notes, and Remembering", Chapter 5 "Reading to Learn", and Chapter and the writing process discussed in Chapter. The process breaks down into these six basic steps:

1. Analyze your audience and goals
2. Plan, research, and organize your content
3. Draft and revise the presentation
4. Prepare speaking notes
5. Practice the presentation
6. Deliver the presentation

Step 1: Analyze Your Audience and Goals

Who will see and hear your presentation—and why? Obviously, other students and the instructor. But you still need to think about what they already know, and don't know, about your topic. If your topic relates to subject matter in class lectures and readings, consider what background information they already have

and be careful not to give a boring recap of things they already know. It may be important, however, to show how your specific topic fits in with subjects that have been discussed already in class, especially in the beginning of your presentation, but be sure to focus on your new topic.

New terms and concepts may become familiar to you while doing your research and preparation, but remember to define and explain them to other students. Consider how much explanation or examples will be needed for your audience to grasp your points. If your topic involves anything controversial or may provoke emotion, consider your audience's attitudes and choose your words carefully. Thinking about your audience will help you find ways to get their attention and keep them interested.

Be sure you are clear about the goals for the presentation. Are you primarily presenting new information or arguing for a position? Are you giving an overview or a detailed report? Review the assignment and talk with the instructor if you're unsure. Your goals guide everything in the presentation: what you say, how much you say, what order you say it in, what visual aids you use, whether you use humor or personal examples, and so forth.

Step 2: Plan, Research, and Organize Your Content

Starting with the assignment and your goals, brainstorm your topic. Jot notes on specific topics that seem important. Often you'll do reading or research to gather more information. Take notes as you would with any reading. As you research the topic at this stage, don't worry at first about how much content you are gathering. It's better to know too much and then pick out the most important things to say than to rush ahead to drafting the presentation and then realize you don't have enough material.

Organizing a presentation is similar to organizing topics in a class paper and uses the same principles. Introduce your topic and state your main idea (thesis), go into more detail about specific ideas, and conclude your presentation. Look for a logical order for the specifics in the middle. Some topics work best in chronological (time) order or with a compare-and-contrast organization. If your goal is to persuade the audience, build up to the strongest reason. Put similar ideas together and add transitions between different ideas.

While researching your topic and outlining your main points, think about visual aids that may help the presentation.

Also start thinking about how much time you have for the presentation, but don't limit yourself yet in the outline stage.

Step 3: Draft and Revise the Presentation

Unless required by the assignment, you don't need to actually write out the presentation in full sentences and paragraphs. How much you write depends on your own learning and speaking style. Some students speak well from brief phrases written in an outline, while other students find it easier to write sentences out completely. There's nothing wrong with writing the presentation out fully like a script if that helps you be sure you will say what you intend to—just so you don't actually get up and read from the script.

You can't know for sure how long a presentation will last until you rehearse it later, but you can estimate the time while drafting it. On the average, it takes two to three minutes to speak what can be written on a standard double-spaced page—but with visual aids, pauses, and audience interaction, it may take longer. While this is only a rough guide, you can start out thinking of a ten-minute presentation as the equivalent of a three to four-page paper.

Never wait until the last minute to draft your presentation. Arrange your time to prepare the first draft and then come back to it a day or two later to ask these questions:

- Am I going on too long about minor points? Could the audience get bored?
- Do I have good explanations and reasons for my main points? Do I need more data or better examples? Where would visual aids be most effective?
- Am I using the best words for this topic and this audience? Should I be more or less informal in the way I talk?
- Does it all hold together and flow well from one point to the next? Do I need a better introduction or transition when I shift from one idea to another?

Visual Aids in Presentations

Except for very short informal presentations, most presentations gain from visuals—and visual aids are often expected. If encouraged or allowed to include visuals in your presentation, plan to do so. Consider all possible types:

- Charts or graphs
- Maps
- Photos or other images
- Video clips
- Handouts (only when necessary—they can be distracting)

Use the available technology, whether it's an overhead projector, PowerPoint slides, a flip chart, or posters. (Talk to your instructor about resources and software for designing your visuals.) Follow these guidelines:

- Design your visuals carefully. Here are some basic rules:
  - Use a simple, neutral background. A light-colored background with text in a dark color works best for words; a dark background used like matting works best for photos.
  - Minimize the amount of text in visuals—more than eight words per slide is usually too much. Avoid simply presenting word outlines of what you are saying. Make sure text is large enough for the audience to read.
  - Don't use more than two pictures in a slide, and use two only to make a direct comparison. Montages are hard to focus on and distract the viewer from what you're saying. Use images only when they support your presentation; don't use clip art just as decoration.
  - Don't put a table of numbers in a visual aid. If you need to illustrate numerical data, use a graph. (Microsoft Excel can make them for you easily.)
  - Don't use sound effects. Use a very brief recording only if directly related to your main points.
  - Don't use visual special effects such as dissolves, spins, box-outs, or other transitions. They are distracting. Use animation sparingly and only if it helps make a point.
- Don't use so many visuals or move through them so quickly that the audience gives all its attention to them rather than to you.
- Practice your presentation using your visual aids, because they affect your timing.
- Explain visuals when needed but not when they're obvious.
- Keep your eyes on your audience, only briefly glancing at visuals to stay in synch with them.
- Don't hand out a printout of your visuals. Your audience should keep their eyes on you instead of fiddling around with paper.

Step 4: Prepare Speaking Notes

As mentioned earlier, it's not a good idea to read your presentation from a written page rather than *deliver* it. To keep your audience's attention, it's important to make eye contact with them and to use a normal speaking voice—and you can't do this if you keep your eyes on a written script.

Speaking notes are a brief outline for your presentation. You might write them on index cards or sheets of paper. Include important facts and data as well as keywords for your main ideas, but don't write too much. (If you forget things later when you start practicing, you can always add more to your outline then.) Be sure to number your cards or pages to prevent a last-minute mix-up.

Think especially about how to open and close your presentation, because these two moments have the most impact of the whole presentation. Use the opening to capture the audience's attention, but be sure it is appropriate for your audience and the goals. Here are some possibilities for your opening:

- A striking fact or example (illustrating an issue or a problem)
- A brief interesting or humorous anecdote (historical, personal, or current event)
- A question to the audience
- An interesting quotation

Then relate the opening to your topic and your main point and move into the body of the presentation. Your closing mirrors the opening. Transition from your last point to a brief summary that pulls your ideas together. You might end with a challenge to the audience, a strong statement about your topic, or a personal reflection on what you have been saying. Just make sure you have a final sentence planned so that you don't end up uncomfortably fumbling around at the end ("Well, I guess that ends my presentation").

Step 5: Practice the Presentation

Practice may be the most important step. It is also the best way to get over stage fright and gain confidence.

Practice first in an empty room where you imagine people sitting, so that you can move your eyes around the room to this "audience." The first time through, focus on putting your outlined notes into full sentences in your natural speaking voice. Don't read your notes aloud. Glance down at your notes only briefly and then look up immediately around the room. Practice two or three times just to find the right words to explain your points and feel more comfortable working with your notes. Time yourself, but don't obsess over your presentation being the exact length required. If your presentation is much too long, however, adjust it now in your notes so that you don't start memorizing things that you might accidentally still say later on even though you cut them from your notes.

Once you feel good speaking from your notes, practice to add some more polish to your delivery. You might want to record or videotape your presentation or ask a friend or roommate to watch your presentation. Pay attention to these aspects of how you speak:

- Try to speak in your natural voice, not in a monotone as if you were just reading aloud. If you will be presenting in a large room without a microphone, you will need to speak louder than usual, but still try to use a natural voice.

- In usual conversation, we speed up and slow down and vary the intensity of our words to show how we feel about what we're saying. Practice changes in your delivery style to emphasize key points.

- Don't keep looking at your notes. It's fine if you use words that are different from those you wrote down—the more you rehearse without looking at your notes, the more natural sounding you will be.

- Be sure you can pronounce all new words and technical terms correctly. Practice saying them slowly and clearly to yourself until you can say them naturally.

- Don't forget transitions. Listeners need a cue when you're moving to a new idea. Practice phrases such as "*Another* important reason for this is…" or "Now let's move on to *why* this is so…."

- Watch out for all those little "filler" words people use so often, such as "like," "you know," "well," and "uh." They're very distracting to most audiences. Listen to or watch your tape to see if you are using these fillers or ask your friend to point it out.

- Pay attention to body language when practicing. Stand up straight and tall in every practice session so that you become used to it. Unless you have to stand at a podium to use a fixed microphone in your presentation, practice moving around while you speak; this helps keep the audience watching you. Use hand and arm gestures if they are natural for you, but don't try to make up gestures for the presentation because they will look phony. Most important, keep your eyes moving over the audience. Practice smiling and pausing at key points.

- Finally, it's a good idea to be ready in case of an accident. Most likely your presentation will go smoothly, you'll stay on track with your notes, and your PowerPoint slides will work fine, but sometimes a mishap happens. Be ready to joke about it, rather than becoming flustered. If the computer fails and you lose your visuals, say something like, "Well, that's a shame, I had some really great photos to show you!" If you drop your index cards or notes, or accidentally skip ahead in your presentation and then have to backtrack, make a joke: "Sorry about that, I was so excited to get to my

next point that I'm afraid I lost control there for a moment!" Let your audience laugh with you—they'll still be on your side, and you can defuse the incident and move on without becoming more nervous.

Step 6: Deliver the Presentation

Be sure to get enough sleep and eat a healthy breakfast. Don't drink too much caffeine or else you'll become hyper and nervous. Wear your favorite—and appropriate—clothing and comfortable shoes. Remember, your audience is on your side! If you're still nervous before your turn, take a few deep breaths. Rehearse your opening lines in your mind. Smile as you move to the front of the room, looking at your audience. You'll see some friendly faces smiling back encouragingly. As you start the presentation, move your eyes among those giving you a warm reception—and if you see some student looking bored or doing something else, just ignore them. But don't focus on any one person in the audience for too long, which could make them nervous or cause them to look away.

Don't keep looking at your watch or a clock: If your rehearsal times were close to your assigned time, your presentation will be also. If you do notice that you're running behind schedule, it may be that you're saying too much out of nervousness. Use your notes to get back on track and keep the pace moving. But it's better to deliver your presentation naturally and fluidly and be a bit long or short than to try to change your words and end up sounding unnatural.

At the closing, deliver your last line with confidence, sweeping your eyes over the audience. If appropriate, ask if there are any questions. When you're done, pause, smile, say "Thank you," and walk back to your seat.

Later on, ask other students and your instructor for comments. Be open minded—don't just ask for praise. If you hear a suggestion for improvement, file that in your memory for next time.

Group Presentations

You may be assigned to give a presentation in a small group. The six-step process discussed previously works for group presentations, too, although group dynamics often call for additional planning and shared responsibilities:

1. Schedule a group meeting as soon as possible to get started. Don't let another student put things off. Explain that you're too busy and won't have time at the last minute.

2. Begin by analyzing your audience and your goals together as a group to make sure everyone understands the assignment the same. Discuss who should do what. While everyone should talk about

what content to include, from here onward, you will take on specialized roles. One or more may begin research and gathering information. Others who are good writers may volunteer to draft the presentation, while one or more others may develop the visual aids. Those who have public speaking experience may volunteer to do all or most of the speaking (unless the assignment requires everyone to have a speaking role). You also need a team leader to keep everyone on schedule, organize meetings, and so on. The best team leader is an even-tempered student with good social skills, who can motivate everyone to cooperate.

3. Steps 2 and 3 can likely be carried out individually with assigned tasks, but group members should stay in touch. For example, the person developing the visuals should be talking to those doing the researching and drafting to see what visuals are needed and get started finding or creating them.

4. Before preparing notes in step 4, meet again to go over the content and plan for visuals. Everyone should be comfortable with the plan so far. Make final decisions about who will do each section of the presentation. Set the time for each segment. Then speakers should prepare their own speaking notes. Let someone with strong speaking skills open or close the presentation (or both), with others doing the other parts.

5. The whole group should be present for practice sessions in step 5, even if not everyone is speaking. Those not speaking should take notes and give feedback. If one student is doing most of the presenting, an alternate should be chosen in case the first choice is sick on the scheduled day. The alternate also needs to practice.

6. During the delivery, especially if using technology for visual aids, one student should manage the visuals while others do the presenting. If several students present different segments, plan the transition from one to another so that the presentation keeps flowing without pauses.

Additional Resources

For Class Presentations

Using PowerPoint. A step-by-step illustrated tutorial for learning how to create effective visual presentations with PowerPoint.http://www.education.umd.edu/blt/tcp/powerpoint.html

"How to Give a Bad Talk." A humorous look (with some very good advice) on what *not* to do when preparing for and giving a class presentation. http://pages.cs.wisc.edu/~markhill/conference-talk.html#badtalk

- Public speaking skills are important because you will likely give presentations in class and perhaps in a future job.

- Overcome anxiety about public speaking by understanding your feelings, preparing well and practicing your delivery, and focusing on your subject.

  - Follow a six-step process to prepare and deliver a presentation:
  1. Analyze your audience and goals
  2. Plan, research, and organize your content
  3. Draft and revise the presentation
  4. Prepare speaking notes
  5. Practice the presentation
  6. Deliver the presentation and seek feedback

- Use visual aids to support a presentation, creating visuals that are relevant, attractive, and powerful.

- The success of a group presentation depends on effective group meetings, successful division of roles, and repeated group practices.

CHECKPOINT EXERCISES

1. If you have given a class presentation in the past, what worked best for you? (If you have not given a presentation yet as a student, what aspect do you think will be most difficult for you?)

   _____

   _____

2. Name the two most important things you can do to reduce anxiety about a class presentation you will have to give.

   _____

   _____

3. For each of the following statements about class presentations, circle T for true or F for false:

T	F	Although you are delivering the presentation to the class, your real audience is your instructor, so you don't need to waste time defining terms and concepts he or she already knows.

T	F	Organizing a presentation or speech is similar to organizing topics in a paper you write for class.
T	F	When creating visual aids, put as many photos as you can in each PowerPoint slide to have the strongest impact.
T	F	In case your memory goes blank while giving a presentation, write the full presentation out so that you can read it aloud.

4. Describe how best to use body language (facial expressions, eye movements, gestures, etc.) when giving a presentation.

_____

_____

_____

5. If you were assigned along with three other students to give a group presentation in the class using this textbook, what would be your preferred role in the preparation stages? Your least preferred role? If you had to take your least preferred role, what single thing would you want to work hardest on to make the presentation successful?

_____

_____

_____

_____

8.2 How Can I Become a Better Writer?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe how a writing class can help you succeed in other courses.
2. Define what instructors expect of a college student's writing.
3. Explain why learning to write is an ongoing task.
4. Understand writing as a process.
5. Develop productive prewriting and revision strategies.
6. Distinguish between revision and editing.
7. Access and use available resources.
8. Understand how to integrate research in your writing.
9. Define plagiarism.

Students are usually required to take at least one writing course in their first year of college. That course is often crucial for your success in college. But a writing course can help you only if you recognize how it connects to your other work in college. If you approach your writing course merely as another hoop you need to jump through, you may miss out on the main message: writing is vital to your academic success at every step toward your degree.

What Do Instructors Really Want?

Some instructors may say they have no particular expectations for student papers. This is partly true. College instructors do not usually have one right answer in mind or one right approach to take when they assign a paper topic. They expect you to engage in critical thinking and decide for yourself what you are saying and how to say it. But in other ways college instructors do have expectations, and it is important to understand them. Some expectations involve mastering the material or demonstrating critical thinking. Other expectations involve specific writing skills. Most college instructors expect certain characteristics in student writing. Here are general principles you should follow when writing essays or student "papers." (Some may not be appropriate for specific formats such as lab reports.)

Title the paper to identify your topic. This may sound obvious, but it needs to be said. Some students think of a paper as an exercise and write something like "Assignment 2: History 101" on the title page. Such a title gives no idea about how you are approaching the assignment or your topic. Your title

should prepare your reader for what your paper is about or what you will argue. (With essays, always consider your reader as an educated adult interested in your topic. An essay is not a letter written to your instructor.) Compare the following:

Incorrect: Assignment 2: History 101

Correct: Why the New World Was Not "New"

It is obvious which of these two titles begins to prepare your reader for the paper itself. Similarly, don't make your title the same as the title of a work you are writing about. Instead, be sure your title signals an aspect of the work you are focusing on:

Incorrect: *Catcher in the Rye*

Correct: Family Relationships in *Catcher in the Rye*

Address the terms of the assignment. Again, pay particular attention to words in the assignment that signal a preferred approach. If the instructor asks you to "argue" a point, be sure to make a statement that actually expresses *your idea* about the topic. Then follow that statement with your reasons and evidence in support of the statement. Look for any signals that will help you focus or limit your approach. Since no paper can cover *everything* about a complex topic, what is it that your instructor wants you to cover?

Finally, pay attention to the little things. For example, if the assignment specifies "5 to 6 pages in length," write a five- to six-page paper. Don't try to stretch a short paper longer by enlarging the font (12 points is standard) or making your margins bigger than the normal one inch (or as specified by the instructor). If the assignment is due at the beginning of class on Monday, have it ready then or before. Do not assume you can negotiate a revised due date.

In your introduction, define your topic and establish your approach or sense of purpose. Think of your introduction as an extension of your title. Instructors (like all readers) appreciate feeling oriented by a clear opening. They appreciate knowing that you have a purpose for your topic—that you have a reason for writing the paper. If they feel they've just been dropped into the middle of a paper, they may miss important ideas. They may not make connections you want them to make.

Build from a thesis or a clearly stated sense of purpose. Many college assignments require you to make some form of an argument. To do that, you generally start with a statement that needs to be supported and build from there. Your thesis is that statement; it is a guiding assertion for the paper. Be

clear in your own mind of the difference between your topic and your thesis. The topic is what your paper is about; the thesis is what *you argue about* the topic. Some assignments do not require an explicit argument and thesis, but even then you should make clear at the beginning your main emphasis, your purpose, or your most important idea.

Develop ideas patiently. You might, like many students, worry about boring your reader with too much detail or information. But college instructors will not be bored by carefully explained ideas, well-selected examples, and relevant details. College instructors, after all, are professionally devoted to their subjects. If your sociology instructor asks you to write about youth crime in rural areas, you can be sure he or she is interested in that subject.

In some respects, how you *develop* your paper is the most crucial part of the assignment. You'll win the day with detailed explanations and well-presented evidence—not big generalizations. For example, anyone can write something broad (and bland) like "The constitutional separation of church and state is a good thing for America"—but what do *you* really *mean* by that? Specifically? Are you talking about banning "Christmas trees" from government property—or calling them "holiday trees" instead? Are you arguing for eliminating the tax-free status of religious organizations? Are you saying that American laws should never be based on moral values? The more you really dig into your topic—the more time you spend thinking about the specifics of what you really want to argue and developing specific examples and reasons for your argument—the more *developed* your paper will be. It will also be much more interesting to your instructor as the reader. Remember, those grand generalizations we all like to make ("America is the land of the free") actually don't mean much at all until we develop the idea in specifics. (Free to do what? No laws? No restrictions like speed limits? Freedom not to pay any taxes? Free food for all? What do you really mean when you say American is the land of the "free"?)

Integrate—do not just "plug in"—quotations, graphs, and illustrations. As you outline or sketch out your material, you will think things like "this quotation can go here" or "I can put that graph there." Remember that a quotation, graph, or illustration does not make a point for you. *You* make the point first and then use such material to help back it up. Using a quotation, a graph, or an illustration involves more than simply sticking it into the paper. Always lead into such material. Make sure the reader understands why you are using it and how it fits in at that place in your presentation.

Build clear transitions at the beginning of every paragraph to link from one idea to another. A good paper is more than a list of good ideas. It should also show how the ideas fit together. As you write the first sentence of any paragraph, have a clear sense of what the prior paragraph was about. Think of the first sentence in any paragraph as a kind of bridge for the reader from what came before.

Document your sources appropriately. If your paper involves research of any kind, indicate clearly the use you make of outside sources. If you have used those sources well, there is no reason to hide them. Careful research and the thoughtful application of the ideas and evidence of others is part of what college instructors value. (We address specifics about documentation later on.)

Carefully edit your paper. College instructors assume you will take the time to edit and proofread your essay. A misspelled word or an incomplete sentence may signal a lack of concern on your part. It may not seem fair to make a harsh judgment about your seriousness based on little errors, but in all writing, impressions count. Since it is often hard to find small errors in our own writing, always print out a draft well before you need to turn it in. Ask a classmate or a friend to review it and mark any word or sentence that seems "off" in any way. Although you should certainly use a spell-checker, don't assume it can catch everything. A spell-checker cannot tell if you have the *right* word. For example, these words are commonly misused or mixed up:

- there, their, they're
- its, it's
- effect, affect
- complement, compliment

Your spell-checker can't help with these. You also can't trust what a "grammar checker" (like the one built into the Microsoft Word spell-checker) tells you—computers are still a long way from being able to fix your writing for you!

Turn in a clean hard copy. Some instructors accept or even prefer digital papers, but do not assume this. Most instructors want a paper copy and most definitely do *not* want to do the printing themselves. Present your paper in a professional (and unfussy) way, using a staple or paper clip on the left top to hold the pages together (unless the instructor specifies otherwise). Never bring your paper to class and ask the instructor, "Do you have a stapler?" Similarly, do not put your paper in a plastic binder unless the instructor asks you to.

The Writing Process

Writing instructors distinguish between process and product. The expectations described here all involve the "product" you turn in on the due date. Although you should keep in mind what your product will look like, writing is more involved with how you get to that goal. "Process" concerns how you work to actually write a paper. What do you actually do to get started? How do you organize your ideas? Why do you make changes along the way as you write? Thinking of writing as a process is important because writing is actually a complex activity. Even professional writers rarely sit down at a keyboard and write out an article beginning to end without stopping along the way to revise portions they have drafted, to move ideas around, or to revise their opening and thesis. Professionals and students alike often say they only realized what they wanted to say *after* they started to write. This is why many instructors see writing as a way to learn. Many writing instructors ask you to submit a draft for review before submitting a final paper. To roughly paraphrase a famous poem, you learn by doing what you have to do.

How Can I Make the Process Work for Me?

No single set of steps automatically works best for everyone when writing a paper, but writers have found a number of steps helpful. Your job is to try out ways that your instructor suggests and discover what works for you. As you'll see in the following list, the process starts before you write a word. Generally there are three stages in the writing process:

1. Preparing before drafting (thinking, brainstorming, planning, reading, researching, outlining, sketching, etc.)—sometimes called "prewriting" (although you are usually still writing *something* at this stage, even if only jotting notes)

2. Writing the draft

3. Revising and editing

Involved in these three stages are a number of separate tasks—and that's where you need to figure out what works best for you.

Because writing is hard, procrastination is easy. Don't let yourself put off the task. Use the time management strategies described in Chapter 2 "Staying Motivated, Organized, and On Track". One good approach is to schedule shorter time periods over a series of days—rather than trying to sit down for one long period to accomplish a lot. (Even professional writers can write only so much at a time.) Try the following strategies to get started:

- **Discuss what you read, see, and hear.** Talking with others about your ideas is a good way to begin to achieve clarity. Listening to others helps you understand what points need special attention. Discussion also helps writers realize that their own ideas are often best presented in relation to the ideas of others.

- **Use e-mail to carry on discussions in writing.** An e-mail exchange with a classmate or your instructor might be the first step toward putting words on a page.

- **Brainstorm.** Jot down your thoughts as they come to mind. Just write away, not worrying at first about how those ideas fit together. (This is often called "free writing.") Once you've written a number of notes or short blocks of sentences, pause and read them over. Take note of anything that stands out as particularly important to you. Also consider how parts of your scattered notes might eventually fit together or how they might end up in a sequence in the paper you'll get to later on.

- **Keep a journal in which you respond to your assigned readings.** Set aside twenty minutes or so three times a week to summarize important texts. Go beyond just summarizing: talk back about what you have been reading or apply the reading to your own experience. See Chapter 5 "Reading to Learn" for more tips on taking notes about your readings.

- **Ask and respond in writing to "what," "why," and "how" questions**. Good questions prompt productive writing sessions. Again, "what" questions will lead to descriptions or summaries; "why" and "how" questions will lead you to analyses and explanations. Construct your own "what," "why," and "how" questions and then start answering them.

- **In your notes, respond directly to what others have written or said about a topic you are interested in.** Most academic writing engages the ideas of others. Academic writing carries on a conversation among people interested in the field. By thinking of how your ideas relate to those of others, you can clarify your sense of purpose and sometimes even discover a way to write your introduction.

All of these steps and actions so far are "prewriting" actions. Again, almost no one just sits down and starts writing a paper at the beginning—at least not a successful paper! These prewriting steps help you get going in the right direction. Once you are ready to start drafting your essay, keep moving forward in these ways:

- **Write a short statement of intent or outline your paper before your first draft.** Such a road map can be very useful, but don't assume you'll always be able to stick with your first plan. Once you start writing, you may discover a need for changes in the substance or order of things in your essay. Such discoveries don't mean you made "mistakes" in the outline. They simply mean you are involved in a process that cannot be completely scripted in advance.

- **Write down on a card or a separate sheet of paper what you see as your paper's main point or thesis.** As you draft your essay, look back at that thesis statement. Are you staying on track? Or are you discovering that you need to change your main point or thesis? From time to time, check the development of your ideas against what you started out saying you would do. Revise as needed and move forward.

- **Reverse outline your paper.** Outlining is usually a beginning point, a road map for the task ahead. But many writers find that outlining what they have already written in a draft helps them see more clearly how their ideas fit or do not fit together. Outlining in this way can reveal trouble spots that are harder to see in a full draft. Once you see those trouble spots, effective revision becomes possible.

- **Don't obsess over detail when writing the draft.** Remember, you have time for revising and editing later on. Now is the time to test out the plan you've made and see how your ideas develop. The last things in the world you want to worry about now are the little things like grammar and punctuation—spend your time developing your material, knowing you can fix the details later.

- **Read your draft aloud.** Hearing your own writing often helps you see it more plainly. A gap or an inconsistency in an argument that you simply do not see in a silent reading becomes evident when you give voice to the text. You may also catch sentence-level mistakes by reading your paper aloud.

What's the Difference between Revising and Editing?

Some students think of a draft as something that they need only "correct" after writing. They assume their first effort to do the assignment resulted in something that needs only surface attention. This is a big mistake. A good writer does not write fast. Good writers know that the task is complicated enough to demand some patience. "Revision" rather than "correction" suggests *seeing again* in a new light generated by all the thought that went into the first draft. Revising a draft usually involves significant changes including the following:

- Making organizational changes like the reordering of paragraphs (don't forget that new transitions will be needed when you move paragraphs)

- Clarifying the thesis or adjustments between the thesis and supporting points that follow

- Cutting material that is unnecessary or irrelevant

- Adding new points to strengthen or clarify the presentation

Editing and proofreading are the last steps following revision. Correcting a sentence early on may not be the best use of your time since you may cut the sentence entirely. Editing and proofreading are focused, late-stage activities for style and correctness. They are important final parts of the writing process, but they should not be confused with revision itself. Editing and proofreading a draft involve these steps:

- Careful spell-checking. This includes checking the spelling of names.

- Attention to sentence-level issues. Be especially attentive to sentence boundaries, subject-verb agreement, punctuation, and pronoun referents. You can also attend at this stage to matters of style.

Remember to get started on a writing assignment early so that you complete the first draft well before the due date, allowing you needed time for genuine revision and careful editing.

What If I Need Help with Writing?

Writing is hard work. Most colleges provide resources that can help you from the early stages of an assignment through to the completion of an essay. Your first resource may be a writing class. Most students are encouraged or required to enroll in a writing class in their first term, and it's a good idea for everyone. Use everything you learn there about drafting and revising in all your courses.

Tutoring services. Most colleges have a tutoring service that focuses primarily on student writing. Look up and visit your tutoring center early in the term to learn what service is offered. Specifically check on the following:

1. Do you have to register in advance for help? If so, is there a registration deadline?

2. Are appointments required or encouraged, or can you just drop in?

3. Are regular standing appointments with the same tutor encouraged?

4. Are a limited number of sessions allowed per term?

5. Are small group workshops offered in addition to individual appointments?

6. Are specialists available for help with students who have learned English as a second language?

Three points about writing tutors are crucial:

1. Writing tutors are there for all student writers—not just for weak or inexperienced writers. Writing in college is *supposed* to be a challenge. Some students make writing even harder by thinking that good writers work in isolation. But writing is a social act. A good paper should engage others.

2. Tutors are not there for you to "correct" sentence-level problems or polish your finished draft. They will help you identify and understand sentence-level problems so that you can achieve greater control over your writing. But their more important goals often are to address larger concerns like the paper's organization, the fullness of its development, and the clarity of its argument. So don't make your first appointment the day before a paper is due, because you may need more time to revise after discussing the paper with a tutor.

3. Tutors cannot help you if you do not do your part. Tutors respond only to what you say and write; they cannot enable you to magically jump past the thinking an assignment requires. So do some thinking about the assignment before your meeting and be sure to bring relevant materials with you. For example, bring the paper assignment. You might also bring the course syllabus and perhaps even the required textbook. Most importantly, bring any writing you've done in response to the assignment (an outline, a thesis statement, a draft, an introductory paragraph). If you want to get help from a tutor, you need to give the tutor something to work with.

Teaching assistants and instructors. In a large class, you may have both a course instructor and a teaching assistant (TA). Seek help from either or both as you draft your essay. Some instructors offer only limited help. They may not, for example, have time to respond to a complete draft of your essay. But even a brief response to a drafted introduction or to a question can be tremendously valuable. Remember that most TAs and instructors want to help you learn. View them along with tutors as part of a team that works with you to achieve academic success. Remember the tips you learned in Chapter 7 "Interacting with Instructors and Classes" for interacting well with your instructors.

Writing Web sites and writing handbooks. Many writing Web sites and handbooks can help you along every step of the way, especially in the late stages of your work. You'll find lessons on style as well as information about language conventions and "correctness." Not only should you use the handbook your composition instructor assigns in a writing class, but you should not sell that book back at the end of the term. You will need it again for future writing. For more help, become familiar with a good Web site for

student writers. There are many, but one we recommend is maintained by the Dartmouth College Writing Center at http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/index.html.

Plagiarism—and How to Avoid It

Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use of material from a source. At the most obvious level, plagiarism involves using someone else's words and ideas as if they were your own. There's not much to say about copying another person's work: it's cheating, pure and simple. But plagiarism is not always so simple. Notice that our definition of plagiarism involves "words and ideas." Let's break that down a little further.

Words. Copying the words of another is clearly wrong. If you use another's words, those words must be in quotation marks, and you must tell your reader where those words came from. But it is not enough to make a few surface changes in wording. You can't just change some words and call the material yours; close, extended paraphrase is not acceptable. For example, compare the two passages that follow. The first comes from *Murder Most Foul*, a book by Karen Halttunen on changing ideas about murder in nineteenth-century America; the second is a close paraphrase of the same passage:

The new murder narratives were overwhelmingly secular works, written by a diverse array of printers, hack writers, sentimental poets, lawyers, and even murderers themselves, who were displacing the clergy as the dominant interpreters of the crime.

The murder stories that were developing were almost always secular works that were written by many different sorts of people. Printers, hack writers, poets, attorneys, and sometimes even the criminals themselves were writing murder stories. They were the new interpreters of the crime, replacing religious leaders who had held that role before.

It is easy to see that the writer of the second version has closely followed the ideas and even echoed some words of the original. This is a serious form of plagiarism. Even if this writer were to acknowledge the author, there would still be a problem. To simply cite the source at the end would not excuse using so much of the original source.

Ideas. Ideas are also a form of intellectual property. Consider this third version of the previous passage:

At one time, religious leaders shaped the way the public thought about murder. But in nineteenth-century America, this changed. Society's attitudes were influenced more and more by secular writers.

This version summarizes the original. That is, it states the main idea in compressed form in language that does not come from the original. But it could still be seen as plagiarism if the source is not cited. This example probably makes you wonder if you can write anything without citing a source. To help you sort out what ideas need to be cited and what not, think about these principles:

Common knowledge. There is no need to cite common knowledge. Common knowledge does not mean knowledge everyone has. It means knowledge that everyone can easily access. For example, most people do not know the date of George Washington's death, but everyone can easily find that information. If the information or idea can be found in multiple sources and the information or idea remains constant from source to source, it can be considered common knowledge. This is one reason so much research is usually done for college writing—the more sources you read, the more easily you can sort out what is common knowledge: if you see an uncited idea in multiple sources, then you can feel secure that idea is common knowledge.

Distinct contributions. One does need to cite ideas that are distinct contributions. A distinct contribution need not be a discovery from the work of one person. It need only be an insight that is not commonly expressed (not found in multiple sources) and not universally agreed upon.

Disputable figures. Always remember that numbers are only as good as the sources they come from. If you use numbers like attendance figures, unemployment rates, or demographic profiles—or any statistics at all—always cite your source of those numbers. If your instructor does not know the source you used, you will not get much credit for the information you have collected.

Everything said previously about using sources applies to all forms of sources. Some students mistakenly believe that material from the Web, for example, need not be cited. Or that an idea from an instructor's lecture is automatically common property. You must evaluate all sources in the same way and cite them as necessary.

Forms of Citation

You should generally check with your instructors about their preferred form of citation when you write papers for courses. No one standard is used in all academic papers. You can learn about the three major forms or styles used in most any college writing handbook and on many Web sites for college writers:

- The Modern Language Association (MLA) system of citation is widely used but is most commonly adopted in humanities courses, particularly literature courses.

- The American Psychological Association (APA) system of citation is most common in the social sciences.
- The Chicago Manual of Style is widely used but perhaps most commonly in history courses.

Many college departments have their own style guides, which may be based on one of the above. Your instructor should refer you to his or her preferred guide, but be sure to ask if you have not been given explicit direction.

Checklists for Revision and Editing

When you revise...

	Check the assignment: does your paper do what it's supposed to do?
	Check the title: does it clearly identify the overall topic or position?
	Check the introduction: does it set the stage and establish the purpose?
	Check each paragraph in the body: does each begin with a transition from the preceding?
	Check organization: does it make sense why each topic precedes or follows another?
	Check development: is each topic fully explained, detailed, supported, and exemplified?
	Check the conclusion: does it restate the thesis and pull key ideas together?

When you edit...

	Read the paper aloud, listening for flow and natural word style.
	Check for any lapses into slang, colloquialisms, or nonstandard English phrasing.
	Check sentence-level mechanics: grammar and punctuation (pay special attention to past writing problems).
	When everything seems done, run the spell-checker again and do a final proofread.
	Check physical layout and mechanics against instructor's expectations: Title page? Font and margins? End notes?

- A writing course is central to all students' success in many of their future courses.

- Writing is a process that involves a number of steps; the product will not be good if one does not allow time for the process.

- Seek feedback from classmates, tutors, and instructors during the writing process.

- Revision is not the same thing as editing.

- Many resources are available to college writers.

- Words and ideas from sources must be documented in a form recommended by the instructor.

CHECKPOINT EXERCISE

1. For each of the following statements, circle T for true or F for false:

T	F	Intellectual freedom means that college instructors have no specific expectations for student writing.
T	F	Since your instructor knows what you are writing about, you do not need to worry about titling your paper.
T	F	The writing process begins when you start writing the first paragraph of a paper.
T	F	If you discover at some point in the writing process that you have to make significant organizational changes or even change your thesis, then you must have misunderstood the assignment.
T	F	Copying directly from another's text is the only serious form of plagiarism.
T	F	The Internet is a free zone of information; Web sources need not be cited.
T	F	All college instructors expect citations to be made in exactly the same way.